

AN INTERVIEW WITH PETER GRUNDY

Interviewer: *Martin Adam*

This interview was conducted in relation to Peter Grundy's keynote lecture *Use and Usage* given at the Faculty of Education, Masaryk University, Brno in September 2011.

Peter Grundy specialises in pragmatics and applied linguistics. His book *Doing Pragmatics* is now in its third edition; his two most recent books are *The Pragmatics Reader* with Dawn Archer (Routledge, 2011), and *English through Art* with Hania Bociek and Kevin Parker (Helbling Languages, 2011). He is currently working on a Pragmatics Handbook.

Peter Grundy taught in schools in the UK and Germany for five years and worked in higher education as a teacher trainer for six years before taking up a post at the University of Durham in 1979. Apart from a two-year period at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University, he taught pragmatics and applied linguistics at Durham until 2002, when he took early retirement. Since then, he has taught on a part-time basis at several universities, most recently as a visiting professor at University of Vienna during the 2011-12 winter semester. He is a past president of IATEFL and currently chairs the IATEFL Wider Membership Scheme Committee.

MA: Peter, you travel around the world, visit conferences, give lectures and present your research. Did you enjoy the ELT Signposts 2011 conference in Brno? What did you find special about it?

PG: Yes, I enjoyed the conference a lot and learned a great deal too. Besides stimulating sessions, for me the good things included excellent organization, warm and generous hospitality – especially at the evening events, and the size of the conference, with enough delegates for variety but not so many as to make me feel like a footnote in a manuscript. I'm ashamed to say that apart from one quick car journey across the Czech Republic many years ago, this was my first visit, so that for me, there was the added interest of seeing everything for the first time. This was particularly striking in Prague, where I spent the afternoon and evening before the conference. Returning on Sunday afternoon when the conference was over, I noticed so many more things about the buildings in particular that I hadn't spotted just three days earlier. Sadly, there wasn't time to explore Brno beyond a

walk up the road to the Augustinian Abbey in the lunch-hour, where I especially admired the modern stained glass in the window above the south door.

MA: Your main field of professional interest seems to be related to pragmatics. How would you explain what pragmatics is about?

PG: I think there may be two questions here: *What is pragmatics?* and *What makes an utterance pragmatic?* The second question is easier, so I'll try and answer that one first.

It's often said that what makes utterances pragmatic is their relation to the context in which they occur. So if I say to you on Tuesday afternoon something like 'We had a salad for lunch', you'll think my use of the past tense refers to a time earlier on that day, whereas if I say the same thing on Wednesday afternoon, you'll think I'm referring to a time earlier on Wednesday, and so on. Because they (almost) always index or point to aspects of the context in which they occur, we call this property of utterances 'indexicality'. Our utterances are indexical not only in relation to time and place, but also in relation to social context, so that whereas I might say to a friend *we had a salad*, I might be more likely to use a formula like *we had a light lunch* in a more formal setting. Leading on from this, you don't have to think very hard to realise that even the simplest words mean different things depending on the context they index. For example, if I'm a student and I say 'I told my lecturer about the assignment', I probably don't use *told* to mean the same thing as a lecturer does when saying 'I told my students about the assignment'.

Another way in which context affects meaning is to act as a trigger for pragmatic strengthening. So if I said that I'd had a salad for lunch, the person I was speaking to would enrich my utterance by adding 'today'. But it goes much further than this since I'd be unlikely to say 'We had a salad for lunch' merely to convey that simple piece of information. I might, for example, be contributing to a discussion about what to eat in the evening and hoping that my friends would infer that I was hungry.

This leads me on to the second way in which utterances are pragmatic – they invite inferences. Because these inferences are usually linked to context in some way, they also vary with that context, so if you knew that I was on a diet, my saying 'We had a salad for lunch' might cause you to infer that I'd been strict with myself. This is a very useful aspect of human language because it enables us to put the same sentences to many different uses, as in the case of the 'salad' sentence. In fact, when you think about it, anything we say can mean almost anything we want it to, given the right context.

Despite what I've just said, it's also possible to think of pragmatic inferences that have nothing to do with context but seem to be related to the way we put

things. So in my talk, I distinguished ‘nice and warm’ (inference – *nice because warm*) from ‘rich and caring’ (inference – *caring despite being rich*).

If we turn to the second question *What is pragmatics?* we find a wide range of opinions, largely depending on how we react to the kinds of examples I mentioned before. Some pragmaticians are interested in indexicality, and in particular how language reflects aspects of social context such as power, or gender, or whether the speaker is a first, second or foreign language user. Others are interested in cognition and how we represent pragmatic inferences in the mind – if a simple utterance like *we had a salad for lunch* is capable of triggering a virtually unlimited number of contextual effects, what does this tell us about cognition? Pragmaticians who study utterances in this way are contributing to what’s usually called ‘theory of mind’. We can contrast this approach with that of yet another group of (more traditional) pragmaticians who are interested in how well-established areas in philosophy like, for example, intention, are realised in the language we use. Such pragmaticians are contributing to what’s usually called ‘philosophy of mind’. Despite the differences between such approaches, what they all have in common is an interest in natural language use and a recognition that what we mean is rarely only what we say.

Having answered these two questions, I’d like to add a further thought, which is this: we can’t always leave understanding what we say only to our interlocutors’ cognitive ability and encyclopaedic knowledge of contexts, although we do of course try and say only things that we think they will understand. I don’t know about Czech, but in English, and many other languages, speakers can use the word *then* not only to refer to a moment in time earlier than the time of the utterance, but also to mark agreement. For example, imagine we are discussing whether to order red or white wine – some of us favour one, some the other. Eventually, someone says ‘Red then’, intending to convey that there’s a general agreement that we should go for red. If the speaker had simply said ‘Red’, we wouldn’t have known that they were suggesting that agreement had been reached. So we sometimes need to indicate to others how we would like our utterances to be understood, as with the use of *then* in this example. In fact, you may have noticed that my use of ‘so’ at the beginning of the last sentence works in the same kind of way and is intended to encourage you to understand the sentence as a kind of conclusion of the argument I’ve been advancing – similarly (sorry, done it again!), you may have noticed how ‘in fact’ at the beginning of this sentence also has a metapragmatic function. Of course (sorry, done it yet again!), markers like *then, so, in fact, similarly* and (of course) *of course* are very obvious ways of signalling how we want what we say to be understood. You might want to argue that all language has a metapragmatic dimension, as the earlier example

of *told* seems to suggest: something is conveyed by *told* that wouldn't have been conveyed by *explained*, and whichever word is used, each different invited interpretation also depends on whether the conversation goes in the student → lecturer or lecturer → student direction.

Finally, notice how narrowly I've answered your question, focusing only on the way social scientists, linguists and linguistic philosophers approach pragmatics. Pragmatism could also be seen as a crucial concept in many other areas, including, for a start, evolution (biology), linguistic and non-linguistic communication (semiotics), ethnography (anthropology), development (psychology), perception and cognition (psychology) and artificial intelligence (computer science).

MA: Can we *teach* pragmatics to our students at the Faculty of Education, Masaryk University? What should be the main points? How can pragmatics be practical in terms of their future teaching careers?

PG: Well (you see from my metapragmatic beginning that I'm probably not going to give you the kind of direct answer that you hoped for), your question begs a question – even assuming it to be possible to teach pragmatics, which your metapragmatic stress on '*teach*' perhaps puts in doubt anyway. And that question is: do we want to? I know there's a great deal of quasi-experimental literature which suggests that explicit teaching has a positive effect, but I don't really see how the term 'L2 pragmatics', which I mentioned in my talk in relation to a recent book I'd been reading (actually, Ishihara and Cohen's *Teaching and Learning Pragmatics*), makes much sense. Learning to apologise like someone else seems to me to be no more than learning a few pragmalinguistic tricks, or put more simply, learning the formulas that someone (else) might use. This isn't really learning pragmatics at all, but rather learning a set of formulaic vocabulary, a kind of decontextualized pragmatics (which I suppose ought to be a contradictory notion). Now I say 'learning' as if 'learning (a set of formulaic) vocabulary' were an unproblematic notion, which of course it isn't, but unfortunately I can't go into this here, although when the IATEFL *Selections* volume from the Brighton conference in 2011 comes out at the beginning of next year, you can read my attempt to rubbish the vocabulary teaching literature there!

MA: On a more personal note, how do you succeed in interconnecting your career and your private life?

PG: Those of us who are fortunate enough to work in higher education have a high degree of self-determination not only in what we do and how we do it, but also in when we do it. When we had a young family, my wife and I were able to juggle schools, playgroups, crèches and child minders and still

have quite a lot of time with our children precisely because we worked in higher education.

But to return to your question, having taken my pension in 2002, my career is now over. However, since retiring, I've taken to doing quite a lot of travelling and occasional teaching, which means that I'm away from home for short periods several times a year. I think in general short periods of time apart are quite good for a marriage, and as long as my wife gets a nice present when I come home, she'll let me come to Brno again. I know that I'm rather breaking with custom at present with a four-month appointment in Vienna, but I will be home for brief periods each month as well as at Christmas.

MA: In your plenary lecture, you were dealing with the concepts of *use* and *usage*; when hearing these two terms, two other notions come into my mind: first, the Saussurean dichotomies and the Prague idea of e.g. phonology and phonetics, and, second, Henry Widdowson's distinction. Can you say a few words on your understanding of *use* and *usage*?

PG: Yes, I see that in this country I will have looked like an accidental structuralist. And what I've just said about *tell* and *explain* may also make it look this way too. In a way, your question helps me to clarify what I was trying to say in my talk because the abstraction from phonetics that phonology represents isn't at all like the relationship, if it exists at all, of *use* and *usage* that I was talking about. I was distinguishing 'types' – repeated instances of pragmatic (i.e. inferred) meaning, which I called *usage* principally because I wanted to invoke Widdowson's famous distinction, from 'tokens' – context-dependent instances of pragmatic meaning, which, again in imitation of Widdowson, I called *use*. So *usage* isn't an abstraction from *use* at all, not an underlying system that explains and predicts all and only the possible instances of use. In the way I was using the terms, *usage* captures default inference irrespective of context, whereas I was using *use* to describe instances of language whose interpretation varies with context. Broadly – but not exactly, because, as we know, there's been a great deal of debate around the periphery – this is the same distinction that Grice hinted at a long time ago when he distinguished generalized and particularized conversational implicature.

Early in my talk I raised the issue of what the default usage would be in a unique context, that of asking about the gender of the only surviving identical quadruplets in Britain, and tried to suggest that the *use/usage* distinction was problematical in such cases. By extension, the *use/usage* distinction should, in my view, be problematized in language teaching too – why shouldn't individual learners find uses particular to themselves irrespective of someone else's usage

preference? Which brings us to the second part of your question, and Henry Widdowson, the author in 1972 of, arguably, the first article about what we now call communicative language teaching. He was distinguishing between ‘knowing what is involved in putting sentences together correctly’, which he called *usage* or *signification*, and ‘a knowledge of what sentences count as in their normal use as a means of communicating’, which he called *use* or *value*, and making the point that language teaching was oriented to the former at the expense of the latter. If you like, he was distinguishing literal meaning (which he called *usage*) from speech acts (which he called *use*), whereas I was distinguishing default inference and nonce inference. If either of us is a structuralist, it may be him, although I must say that I don’t much like this way of thinking about semantics and pragmatics either.

MA: Is a modern teacher of English to teach the use rather than the usage, then?

PG: The job of a teacher is to give learners the opportunity to use language in ways that are particular to themselves. This isn’t actually Henry Widdowson’s argument at all (although he might well subscribe to it), and in fact the argument he advances is precisely the kind of argument that’s led some so-called communicative language teachers, especially those who rely on speech act dominated coursebooks, to deny learners the opportunity to use language in ways that are particular to themselves. Of course, no coursebook author wants to work with tokens precisely because they don’t generalize over other instances of use. In the real world, a proportion of what we say is ‘typical’ and a proportion isn’t. For obvious reasons, you can’t ‘teach’ that non-typical proportion, but you can facilitate the use of context-dependent language in your classrooms. In my talk, I explained that the concept triggered in my wife’s mind by my use of ‘back’ in the utterance ‘I should be back by eight but you know what trains are like’ varied depending on the day of the day of the week. I don’t see why learners can’t be given opportunities to use words to trigger concepts intended by themselves and quite unlike those intended by other learners, or even by themselves on other occasions.

Please don’t take it amiss when I say that for me the use of ‘teach’ in the question is problematic. We all agree that there’s a gap between what the teacher knows and what the learner knows. If the teacher tries to fill this gap, we call it ‘teaching’, but if we’re skilled enough to set things up so that the learner fills the gap, then we call it ‘learning’.

MA: How can awareness of implicature (both on the part of the teacher and the students) affect our ELT practice?

PG: As it happens, I've just finished struggling with a paper on the topic of language awareness, which I was rash enough to talk about at TESOL Arabia earlier this year. My two principle arguments were that there's a great deal of talk about language awareness in the literature but virtually no one provides any evidence of the phenomenon. However, if we look at pragmatics, implicatures are a prime kind of evidence because if they are responded to, there must be awareness of them even though they operate at the level of inference. This leads to the second argument, that talk about awareness as a form of 'consciousness', as is typical in the literature, is (a) problematic because we don't know what consciousness is and (b) misleading if treated as a criterial property of awareness because we are only tacitly aware of most aspects of language use, including pragmatics. So the question is perhaps about the extent to which it's useful to raise awareness of implicature. That's fine by me so long as we don't end up teaching our learners about implicature instead of providing them with opportunities to communicate implicatures.

MA: Students will know your book *Doing Pragmatics*; what are your publication plans for the nearest future?

PG: The first part of your question is kind but may not be strictly true! But can we pause a moment on the title, which by the way was thought up by a clever editor and which I was too dim to have thought of for myself. Bearing in mind what we've been saying about putative notions like 'teaching pragmatics' and 'learning pragmatics', 'doing pragmatics' does seem like a good idea (although of course I may not have succeeded in this aim to any great degree in the book). As to future plans, I'm currently working with Anne Barron (Luneburg) and Gu Yueguo (Beijing) on a pragmatics handbook. This project is still at an early stage, but I'm already excited because it seems to me that the existing handbooks are either several volumes long or too difficult for student readers or both (and, of course, too expensive). We hope our handbook will sell well enough for the publisher to produce a paperback edition which will then supplant the many pragmatics textbooks, including *Doing Pragmatics*!

Finally, thank you for asking me these questions. Having to think out the answers has been a very useful experience, more useful for me probably than the answers will be for your readers.